

## NOSE PICKING

ALBERT P. SELTZER, M.D.

*Department of Otolaryngology, Graduate School of  
Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia*

The average person would consider it insulting to be advised not to pick his nose. Nose-picking is not done in polite society; it is in a class with nail-biting, ear-picking, sniffing and other mannerisms that simply are not done by the well-bred person. The physician is not so much interested in the social dictates of custom, but he knows that nose-picking is not only a vulgar, ill-bred habit but a habit dangerous to health. The well-bred person does not pick his nose; perhaps it would be more correct to state that people, even the most well-bred ought not to pick their noses, but do, far too often. If you do not believe it, look around you the next time you are at a public gathering, at a ball game, or a lecture or at church—even watch yourself carefully when you are absent-mindedly reading a book or waiting for a train.

Nose-picking can be understood in children, although they should be trained away from the habit, but it is inexcusable in the adult. It does, however, occur in adults and children, in the upper classes as well as the lower. We will not concern ourselves with the social implications of this habit, but we will turn our attention to its effects, medically speaking.

The physician is frequently concerned with the harmful effects of meddling with the nose. Into the office of the general practitioner, the pediatrician, and the nose and throat specialist come literally countless patients with disease and injury to the delicate tissues of the nose resulting from injudicious probing with the tip of the fingernail.

The nose does more than grace the face and contribute greatly to facial contour and expression. It is an essential organ of the body and performs several functions vital to general bodily welfare. The interior of the nasal passageways has several shelf-like projections of bone so that the surface area is rather large; air passing in is disturbed into miniature eddies and whirlpools and comes in contact with a good part of this surface before being drawn into the lung. These various projections as well as the walls of the passageway and the thin partition of bone, the septum, which separates the two nasal canals are all lined with a remarkable membrane. This membrane is of a velvety and silky texture and is rich with a network of tiny blood vessels and nerves; the inspired air comes in close contact with this lining membrane. Many minute glands beneath the surface of the membrane constantly secrete a thick, viscous, almost jelly-like liquid which is called mucus. The membrane, being continually bathed in mucus, remains wet at all times and the air,

coming in contact with it, is moistened and humidified. This makes the air we breathe more suitable for the lung, as dry air is irritating to the tissues of the bronchial tubes and the lungs. The vast number of blood vessels in the lining membrane have the ability to contract or expand in response to nervous stimulation and so the amount of blood available to the membrane varies. In hot weather, these blood vessels contract and less blood passes through them; in cold weather they dilate and more blood is available. Blood is warm; the more blood present, the warmer the membrane will be. This warming or cooling effect is passed on to the circulating air so that the nose acts as a sort of thermostat, cooling hot air and warming cold air, bringing the inspired gases to a temperature near that of the internal body so that the air received by the lung has been adjusted nearly to body temperature. The third function of the nose and its lining membrane is to act as a cleansing agent. We have mentioned the constant out-pouring of mucus by the tiny glands; this mucus is sticky and has somewhat the consistency of fly-paper. Any dust, dirt, or other small foreign matter that has chance to enter the nose will stick to the mucus. The cells of the lining membrane contain tiny silky processes resembling tentacles; these threads of tissue beat continually, back and forth, in rhythm (giving an effect like wind on a wheat field). The action of these little hairs beating in rhythm moves the mucus in a sheet as a continuous stream towards the back of the nose where it drops into the throat and is swallowed automatically to be disposed. The dirt and foreign objects are thereby kept away from the lung where they would do damage and are transferred into the stomach where they are harmless. This action is somewhat like a moving sheet of fly-paper on a conveyor belt.

We have seen, therefore, how the nose and its lining membrane perform three valuable services to the body in rendering the inspired air fit for the lung; the nose humidifies the air, warms it, and purifies it. Since this membrane is a delicate structure with a complex function, it may readily be understood that when the membrane is damaged, its functions are interfered with and the body as a whole suffers.

We have described the moving sheet of mucus which passes continuously through the nose, collecting dirt, to be swallowed and disposed. When an excess of dirt is present, it becomes mixed with the mucus to form a more or less solid mass of material too heavy to be transported backwards into the throat by the

action of the tiny beating hairs. This mass will produce a feeling of irritation and discomfort in the nose and, in addition, may more or less block off the air passage; the patient attempts to rid himself of this particle, usually by the socially acceptable and hygienic practice of blowing the nose into a handkerchief. Similarly, excess masses of mucus may be formed when, for any reason, the mucous secretions are thickened—this occurs in certain low-grade inflammatory states in the nose as well as in certain metabolic phases. It is these masses of hardened mucus intermixed with dirt that the patient attempts to remove when he picks the nose.

Some children and adults pick the nose even when there is no such irritating material to remove as a sort of nervous mannerism, just as others smoke, chew gum, twiddle their fingers, or twirl Phi Beta Kappa keys for no good purpose. There are individuals who have excess nervous energy usually due to inner emotional stresses and tensions, who cannot keep still but who must always keep their hands in motion. These individuals, perhaps, would not dream of picking their noses intentionally, but yet they frequently perform this unsafe and disgusting mannerism subconsciously when thinking of something else.

When a finger is inserted into the nostril, the chief danger is from that hard horny protrusion at its end, the finger-nail, which can, at times, be almost razor-sharp and lethal. When the sharp edge of the nail comes into contact with the delicate membrane lining the nasal passage, a laceration or tear readily occurs. The tear will bleed; nose-picking is a frequent cause of nose bleeds. After the bleeding subsides, a scab forms; further meddling easily knocks off the scab to inaugurate a fresh flow of blood. When this sequence of events has occurred a number of times, a state of chronic irritation and inflammation may be set up which is difficult to manage. The bony partition separating the two nasal chambers from each other is very thin in places, at times, virtually paper-thin; it is therefore fragile and a hole can readily be poked through it by an exploring finger tip. A perforation of the septum upsets the dynamics of normal air flow inside the nose and this abnormal communicating passage disturbs natural breathing mechanisms and can lead to difficulty of various sorts.

Fortunately, the most serious end-result of nose picking is rare, but it is a potential hazard nevertheless. This is cancer of the nose and cancer anywhere, of course, is a serious and often fatal condition. The cause of cancer is not precisely known as yet, but it has been well established in experimental laboratories that chronic irritation is one of the factors which can lead to cancer. Constant nose-picking is certainly a form of chronic irritation and may well prepare the way for malignant disease within the nose.

Frequently a teacher or a parent will observe a child picking the nose but all commands and exhortations are unable to check the habit. Bleeding and

perhaps chronic inflammation will follow and the child will be sent to the doctor. The child may be unaware of his nose-picking, or may deny it when questioned specifically about the habit, and for this reason the true cause of trouble may not become apparent for some time. Perhaps the patient will receive treatment for some other condition of the nose and cure thereby delayed because the real difficulty has avoided detection.

An adult should, by will power, be able to prevent himself from nose picking. Perhaps he has regarded it as an unpleasant but trivial mannerism, not to be done in society, but all right in private. If this is the case, a word about the dangers of the habit should correct this misapprehension, for nose-picking should be avoided in the interests of good health as well as good taste. For the adult who cannot control his restless fingers and certainly for the unruly child a simple trick will prevent harmful effects. Merely cut the nails short and keep them short; a well cut finger-nail cannot lacerate the nasal lining membrane to produce trouble.

In cases where nose-picking is an unconscious mannerism which cannot voluntarily be controlled, there is another useful and simple trick. The fingertips can be coated with something which has a pungent and lasting odor (essence of peppermint or oil of cloves may be used in this connection). Then when the wayward finger absent-mindedly begins to approach the nostril, the strong aroma of cloves or peppermint will be a reminder for the patient to put his fingers elsewhere.

For adults and children who nose-pick persistently as a nervous mechanism, sometimes a visit to a good psychiatrist is indicated. The outward nervous mannerism may be evidence of a strong inner emotional tension state. Anxiety and tension states are common today, in children and in adults; most of these early forms of neurosis can be treated and cured by the psychiatric specialist if he is consulted early enough. Unfortunately, most people have a dread of psychiatrists and would not consider consulting him for anything as trivial as a nervous mannerism, with the result that the inner emotional conflict becomes more deeply imbedded and may eventually cast a shadow over the entire individual's future. This is not to say that nose-picking is a symptom of insanity, but the relationship of a habit mannerism to emotional trouble is good to remember.

Nose-picking is much too common. Not only a disgusting trait, it is a dangerous habit which may cause bleeding, infection, perforation of the nasal septum and even cancer. The habit should be avoided. Close cutting of the nails will prevent harmful effects; an aromatic substance on the finger-tips may aid in breaking the habit. In deep-seated habit mannerisms, a psychiatric consultation should be considered. This matter deserves the attention of all people who wish to be in good taste and to remain in good health.